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ED 020 172 TE 000 449

A PERSPECTIVE ON USAGE.

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PUB DATE 63

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.25 HC-$0.40 8P.

DESCRIPTORS- *ENGLISH INSTRUCTION, *LANGUAGE USAGE, *STANDARD SPOKEN USAGE, *LANGUAGE STANDARDIZATION, DIACHRONIC LINGUISTICS, LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT, LANGUAGE PATTERNS, LANGUAGE TEACHERS, DIALECTS, ENGLISH, NONSTANDARD DIALECTS,

APPROPRIATE ENGLISH USAGE SHOULD NOT BE DETERMINED BY RIGID AND ARTIFICAL REGULATIONS SET UP BY SCHOLARS MORE INTERESTED IN DEMONSTRATING THEIR OWN SUPERIORITY THAN IN DESCRIBING THE WAY LANGUAGE IS ACTUALLY USED. INSTEAD, GOOD ENGLISH SHOULD REVEAL ITSELF AS "THE PRODUCT OF CUSTOM" AND SHOULD CHANGE WITH "THE ORGANIC LIFE OF THE LANGUAGE." THUS, STANDARD ENGLISH IS THAT WHICH IS "WIDELY RECOGNIZED AS ACCEPTABLE WHENEVER ENGLISH IS SPOKEN AND UNDERSTOOD," AND SUBSTANDARD ENGLISH REFERS TO THOSE WORDS AND PHRASES NOT INCORRECT IN THEMSELVES BUT NOT USED BY THE PRESTIGE GROUP IN A COMMUNITY. CONSEQUENTLY, ALTHOUGH A STUDENT SHOULD BE CAUTIONED ABOUT THE RELATIVELY FEW EXPRESSIONS TO WHICH TEACHERS OBJECT ON EXAMINATIONS, HE SHOULD UNDERSTAND THAT ENGLISH TAKES ITS FORM NOT FROM AUTHORITATIVE RULES BUT FROM BEING (1) APPROPRIATE TO THE SUBJECT, (2) VALID IN RELATION TO CONTEMPORARY USAGE, AND (3) COMFORTABLE FOR BOTH SPEAKER AND LISTENER. SUCH USAGE INCLUDES COLLOQUIAL ENGLISH. (THIS ARTICLE APPEARED IN "LANGUAGE, LINGUISTICS, AND SCHOOL PROGRAMS, PROCEEDINGS OF THE SPRING INSTITUTES, 1963." CHAMPAIGN, ILL., NCTE, 1963.) (LH)

ED020172

LANGUAGE, LINGUISTICS, AND SCHOOL PROGRAMS

Proceedings of the Spring Institutes, 1963

of the

National Council of Teachers of English

Bernard J. Weiss

Director

Louisville, Ky.

March 3-9

Atlantic City, N. J.

April 21-27

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NATIONAL COUNCIL OF TEACHERS OF ENGLISH

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A PERSPECTIVE ON USAGE

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G. & C. Merriam Company

Language is a system of sounds and symbols that can be manipulated to communicate human concepts. One word leads to another, one utterance to another as, in documentary movies, one rivulet joins another high in the mountains, breathlessly increasing in volume and speed until it flows into the ocean. Our language is like the ocean except that we can sound the ocean's depth, measure its surface, and calculate its volume. The limits of a living language cannot be determined.

About 300 million people today speak English as their first or native language. Many other millions use it as a second language. English-language newspapers produce daily several billion words. Publishers turn out 15 to 20 new books a day—another million words. Every speaker (it has been estimated) sends forth into the air about 40,000 words a day. Multiply this by 187 million speakers in the U. S. alone, and you are in the realm of a figure so large that it is incomprehensible.

This huge number of words constitutes the open-end corpus that is usage in its entirety. It encompasses not only every utterance spoken and heard but also every utterance written and seen, even, if you will, every graphic symbol and every significant sound. Written utterances are usually seen more times by more people and persist for a longer period than a single spoken utterance. In this aspect usage includes even the number of times a word is looked up in a wordbook. This number can hardly be counted, but it is clear that the countable number of times a word is used is only a fraction of its total linguistic diffusion. For example, a word used once by Shakespeare may be looked up millions of times by high school and college students.

Book reviewers take nourishment from books. Books must have authors. To reviewers, then, the sun rises and sets on the number of authors they can read. One reviewer can, however, make lasting acquaintance with only a few hundred authors a year and in a decade with only a few thousand. The late Wilson Follett near the end of a lifetime of preoccupation with belles lettres doubted that as many as 14,000 writers could ever be found in the period of two decades—he said "one brief period" (*Atlantic*, January 1962)—who are worth being quoted for their use of English. Here is a crux. Here is evidence that

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Follett had no conception of linguistic diffusion. To him the criterions of usage are to be based on the language used by only a few thousand writers.

The Conflict: A Matter of History

It is fascinating to study usage in its vast areas of linguistic diffusion, to watch language in motion, to observe what society does with its word stock, and how language in turn shapes our culture. Our culture makes of language a system, and like all systems it has behavior that can be analyzed in terms of practice. If the language student who discovers this practice and formulates it in rules—only with difficulty can we avoid this word—could restrict their circulation to fellow language students, the rules could never become instruments of oppression or repression. Such restriction would be impracticable, however, for busy teachers who cannot devote all their days and nights to studying language need from language students enlightenment and guidance so that they can teach the truth about language. They need help particularly to offset a body of artificial rules that began in the eighteenth century and have been affirmed and reaffirmed down to the present. Unlike the rules that language students derive from a realistic observation of language, these classical or traditional rules that need offsetting were not originally formulated on the basis of what users of the language do, but rather of what they ought to do in the opinions of a few. They were even objected to in the eighteenth century by competent observers of the language behavior.

Noah Webster 175 years ago said:

> But when a particular set of men, in exalted stations, undertake to say, "we are the standards of propriety and elegance, and if all men do not conform to our practice, they shall be accounted vulgar and ignorant," they take a very great liberty with the rules of language and the rights of civility.
>
> *Dissertation on the English Language* (1789) as quoted by A. W. Read, *PMLA* LI (1936), 1147.

After Professor Bergen Evans and his sister Cornelia Evans brought out their *Dictionary of Contemporary American Usage* in 1957, Wilson Follett attacked it in the *Atlantic* (February 1960). Though the attack may have seemed withering to *Atlantic* subscribers, it is only speciously convincing since it reveals complete ignorance of the history of English. Its very opening sentence is inaccurate in fact and loaded with misleading implications: "Linguistic scholarship, once an encouragement to the most exacting definitions and standards of

workmanship, has for some time been dedicating itself to the abolition of standards; and the new rhetoric evolved under its auspices is an organized assumption that language good enough for anybody is good enough for everybody." It should be unnecessary to point out wherein this is nonsense unsupported by evidence.

Follett charged the Evanses with managing to convey shrewdly that "the way to attain effective expression is to keep our ears open, bank on our natural and inescapable linguistic inheritance, and cultivate an English that will make us indistinguishable from the ostensibly educated surrounding majority." This, intended as an accusation, is actually a fairly sound generalized attitude about usage. Follett, however, went on to fill a long paragraph with examples of what he called marginal, dubious, and suspect expressions that must inevitably result from keeping one's ears open. Then he turned on the Evans dictionary as the place where one can find "the densest possible concentration of what the elder rhetoricians classed as solecisms," a dictionary that is "a translation into practical advice of what the most erudite philologists and lexicographers have for some time been telling us about the sources of health and vitality in our language."

I hope the absurdity of this needs no underlining, but in case you do not yet detect the holier-than-thou arrogance of the self-appointed superior user of English, Follett said the kind of English the Evanses support may be all right for the purveyor of insurance or real estate or the chairman of a fund-raising campaign. "Let those who choose define usage as what a swarm of folk say or write by reason of laziness, shiftlessness, or ignorance; the tenable definition is still what the judicious do as a result of all that they can muster of conscious discrimination."

In a later article in the *Atlantic* (March 1960) Professor Evans by calling attention to a bit of indisputable history and common knowledge poked holes in Follett's charge that anything goes, a "charge that, with all the idiot repetition of a needle stuck in a groove, the uninformed ceaselessly chant against modern grammarians. It is useless to argue with such people because they are not, really, interested in language at all. They are interested solely in demonstrating their own superiority." What John Steinbeck said about literature in his Nobel Prize address in Stockholm (December 10, 1962) applies to this kind of cultivation of language: "Literature was not promulgated by a pale and emasculated critical priesthood singing their litanies in empty churches—nor is it a game for the cloistered elect, the tin-horn mendicants of low calory despair."

Some Pertinent Illustrations

A professor of English just turned fifty said recently that in his boyhood in Michigan he had an English teacher who assiduously trained him and his classmates to say *somebody's else* and never *somebody else's.* That was somewhere around 1925. *Somebody's else,* you may recall, is the idiom of Dickens, Thackeray, George Eliot, and Mark Twain. On July 31, 1881, the New York *Times* headlined a story about public school teachers being told that *somebody else's* is correct. Approval of this idiom was immediately disputed by a purist of the time, Alfred Ayres in his *Verbalist* (1881). Forty-five years later at least one English teacher agrees with Ayres and is still hammering away an insistence upon using *somebody's else.*

Before leaving Ayres we might observe other examples of his prescriptiveness. He objects to the verb *donate* as an abomination, to the noun *dress* for an outer garment worn by women instead of the proper term *gown,* to the noun *lunch,* an inelegant abbreviation for *luncheon.* He even points out in passing that the question "Have you had luncheon?" is preferable to "Have you had your luncheon?" because "we may in most cases presuppose that the person addressed would hardly take anybody's else luncheon." The adjective *underhanded* "though found in dictionaries, is a vulgarism" for *underhand.*

Some of these may sound unbelievable to one who is unfamiliar with what Follett's predecessors were capable of. But they are no sillier than some of today's pronouncements about *like, who, more unique, different than, due to, do not think, cannot help but, back of, blame it on.* One of the surprising things about these shibboleths is their small number: you can easily classify them in a list of well under a hundred.

Insight for the Teacher

If any teacher feels like saying, "You may be right historically or linguistically, but what do I teach my high school students who are facing college entrance exams?" I think the answer is simple. Tell them that there is an absurdly small number of expressions which they may be asked to stop and change. Teach them how to recognize these shibboleths and how to deal with them on examination papers. After all, answering questions in an examination is a kind of linguistic occasion, and surely giving the answer that the examiner wants is highly appropriate to the occasion.

This suggests a definition that is probably (or should be) the best-known definition of good English, that of Professor Robert Pooley:

> Good English is that form of speech which is appropriate to the purpose of the speaker, true to the language as it is, and comfortable to speaker and listener. It is the product of custom, neither cramped by rule nor freed from all restraint; it is never fixed, but changes with the organic life of the language.
>
> —*Grammar & Usage in Textbooks on English* (1933), 155.

Note that this definition says nothing about reputability (by reference to standard authors), nothing about preservation (by defense of the traditional or elegant), and nothing about literary or formal usage. The key word is *appropriate.*

Fifteen years before Pooley's definition Brander Matthews spoke on Dr. Johnson's once held but later abandoned ideas about fixing the language:

> To "fix" a living language is an idle dream; and if it could be brought about it would be a dire calamity. Luckily language is never in the exclusive control of scholars. It does not belong to them alone, as they are often inclined to believe; it belongs to all who have it as a mother-tongue. It is governed not by elected representatives but by direct democracy, by the people as a whole assembled in town meeting.
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> —Paper by Brander Matthews, February 14, 1918, as quoted by A. W. Read, *PMLA* LI (1936), 1173.

I want to read to you one more statement about good English, that of Professor Sumner Ives:

> . . . "good" English is that which most effectively accomplishes the purpose of the author (or speaker) without drawing irrelevant attention from the purpose to the words or constructions by which this purpose is accomplished. Thus, for ordinary purposes, "good" English is that which is customary and familiar in a given context and the language which should be used is that which is currently being used, provided this current use does not bring unwelcome attention.
>
> —*Word Study (December 1961).*

Good English does not have a one-to-one relationship with standard English. So, finally, to deal directly with the standard/substandard pair I will give you an acceptable formal definition of the term *standard English:*

> . . . the English that with respect to spelling, grammar, pronunciation, and vocabulary is substantially uniform though not devoid of regional differences, that is well-

> established by usage in the formal and informal speech and writing of the educated, and that is widely recognized as acceptable wherever English is spoken and understood.
>
> Webster III (1961), 2223.

I do not have for you a definition of the substantive term *substandard English*, for substandard English is not an entity in the same way that slang does not exist as an entity, as pointed out by Stuart B. Flexner in the Wentworth-Flexner *Dictionary of American Slang* (1960, p. xv). No normal person in real life talks substandard English all the time. Instead I will give you a definition of the adjective *substandard* that can be applied to this or that expression as it occurs in context:

> . . . conforming to a pattern of linguistic usage existing within a speech community but not that of the prestige group in that community in choice of word (as *set*, for *sit*), form of word (as *brung*, for *brought*), pronunciation (as *twicet*, for *twice*), grammatical construction (as the boys *is* growing fast), or idiom (as *all to once* for *all at once*).
>
> Webster III (1961), 2280.

Support for the Student

Everyone is a student of language in the sense that he is an observer and user, or in somewhat the same way he is a student of physiology whenever he is awake. But he has only limited control over physiological processes. He cannot ordinarily will his heart to beat faster nor his kidneys to function differently. Chances are he does not even know what his pancreas does or why he has lymph glands under his arms. Similarly he uses language that he does not wholly understand and certainly does not always consciously control. This native spontaneous use continues even though English is formally studied every year from the first grade through the twelfth. The number of hours a day that a student comes under the influence of an English teacher is small compared with those under the influence of other teachers; and for some students even the school in its totality may not be their chief linguistic influence. In any event, a student like everyone alive has problems of continuous adjustment, of rejection and acceptance, of frustration and satisfaction. Most of these problems are in one way or another language problems. His use of language should be a strength not a weakness, an opening to understanding not a barrier. It should above all be appropriate to the situation. A teacher

can introduce a student to the language of literature when he is ready so that when (if ever) he puts on an aesthetic or critical hat and wants to read for pleasure, he can do so. But I suggest that a teacher should avoid telling a student that what he has learned to be appropriate for various nonliterary or extracurricular situations is not to be used because it is wrong according to a set of inapplicable rules.

Standard English includes the colloquial English of all normal people. Standard English and colloquial English are not contrastive, as pointed out by Kenyon. No one should struggle with this problem without reading John S. Kenyon's "Cultural Levels and Functional Varieties of English" (1948). At one time in the study of English usage scholars regarded elevated texts as the proper standard for grammars, and colloquial differences found in other utterances—now often called casual—were regarded as inferior. Professor Charles Voegelin in discussing this point says that "the new inclination of linguistic interest in America is in no danger of returning to the classical view." (*Style in Language*, ed. T. A. Sebeok, 1960, p. 57). I hope he is right.

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